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School choice in rural India: Perception versus reality

📅 25 August, 2020

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School choice has increased significantly in India – with growth of low-fee private schools – and this is considered important within a market-based approach to schooling. Based on a field study across four states in rural India, this article shows how parents emphasise many educationally unimportant, aspirational factors in their choice, and how their choice of low-fee private schools is often based on inaccurate information.

The expansion of the school system – both public and low-fee private schools (LFPS) – can be said to have opened up more choice for relatively disadvantaged parents to access such schools. In educational debates, on the one hand, this development is lauded as a market mechanism that would ensure purported better functioning private schools weed out inefficient public schools (Shah and Miranda 2013). However, others have drawn attention to how inequalities in the already stratified school system would be enhanced with an unregulated growth of LFPS

(Härmä 2011, Srivastava 2007, Ravitch 2010, 2013, OECD (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development), 2016).

How parents make school choices for their children

In a recent study conducted by the Azim Premji Foundation, we seek to understand how parents make school choices, what considerations are crucial in choosing a school, and how these factors map to the objective reality of schools (Lahoti and Mukhopadhyay 2019). The three-part field study included the following: (a) a survey of 1,210 families (consisting of 2,464 children) spread across 25 villages in 10 districts across four states (Chhattisgarh, Karnataka, Rajasthan, and Uttarakhand); (b) a 'School Information Tool' administered to the principals and teachers in 121 public and private schools in these sites, along with observations of school processes, to ascertain the match between parental perceptions about schools and the objective reality of education in schools; and (c) semi-structured, qualitative interview schedules to collect data on issues emerging from the quantitative analysis from a sub-sample of respondents comprising 50 parents, 12 headteachers, and 24 teachers.

One block per district was chosen, and most of the blocks are those in which the respective district headquarters is located. The specific site for the study in each block was a delimited geography comprising a set of villages (that is, a group of around 2-3 neighbouring villages) based on prespecified criteria, including the presence of a balanced mix of public and private schools to ensure diversity in school options (both public and private) for the study.

First, we find that school choice, overall, is complex, with a range of diverse factors being important to different parents. Perceptions of teaching-learning is the most important factor across parents. In addition, many parents also consider discipline and safety as important factors determining their choice. English-medium education is a key consideration for parents who chose private schools, while expenditure is an important factor for parents who chose public schools.

Second, in terms of the distribution of preferences between private and public schools in the vicinity, the study finds that parental preferences are not concentrated in specific schools, whether private or public. The most preferred school in the vicinity where parents would like to send their children, across 25 villages, is almost as likely to be a public school as a private school.

The qualitative interviews reinforce the complicated nature of school choice. Among other things, this is revealed in the reconsideration and revision of initial choices made by the parents, and their switching both within (from one private school to another private school) and between school types (from private school to

public school). Some parents are also seen to continue with the already chosen private schools – despite their revalued perceptions of these schools – due to their aspirations for access to cultural capital.

Parental perceptions and school realities

We also compare parental perceptions (from the survey tool) about two specific school attributes – medium of instruction and teacher characteristics – with how these attributes are seen to actually manifest in schools (from the School Information Tool).

For the first attribute, we find that there is a large discrepancy in parental reporting of English as the medium of instruction, the official reporting of English as the medium by schools, and the medium of instruction used in practice in schools. Of the children who attend private schools, 39% are reported as going to English-medium schools by their parents. However, only 22% of the children who go to private schools have English as the official medium of instruction (as reported by school authorities). Further, school observations reveal that the percentage of children going to private schools that actually have English as the medium of instruction is only 10%.

Table 1. Official and actual medium of instruction for children whose parents perceive are studying in English-medium schools (%)

	Official medium of instruction	Actual medium of instruction
Hindi	43	52
Kannada	5	5
English	52	25
Mixed	0	18



Also, only 25% of parent's perception of English as the medium of instruction in their children's schools matches with reality (Table 1). More than half (57%) of the children who are supposed to be attending English-medium schools are actually studying in the dominant regional language – Hindi or Kannada. Around 18% of

these children go to a school that has books in English, but with teachers translating those into the dominant regional language while teaching (categorised as 'Mixed' in Table 1).

For the second attribute, when parental perceptions of teacher characteristics are compared with school-level data of individual teacher characteristics, there is a mismatch between the two for private schools. That is, for private schools, children of parents who identify teacher characteristics as an important attribute – among the top three reasons for their choice of schools – do not necessarily go to schools with better teacher characteristics.

In this analysis parents were grouped into two categories: those who consider teacher characteristics to be important in governing the choice of their children's school, and those who do not consider teacher characteristics to be important. Schools actually chosen by the parents in the first category have lower percentage of academically qualified teachers (76 vs. 87%), lower percentage of teachers with professional qualifications (64 vs. 74%), and lower average experience of teachers (74 vs. 79 months), as compared to the second category (Table 2).

Table 2. Teacher characteristics: Parental perceptions vs. school realities

Schools	Parental perceptions	% graduate teachers	% teachers with professional qualifications	Average teacher experience in months
Public	Parents for whom teacher characteristics are important	96	98	169
	Parents for whom teacher characteristics are not important	92	98	164
Private	Parents for whom teacher characteristics are important	76	64	74
	Parents for whom teacher characteristics are not	87	74	79

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Therefore, the analysis of parental perceptions vis-à-vis school realities shows a huge mismatch between the two in case of LFPS. Though parents report that their children are attending English-medium schools, the reality for most such children is that they are not being taught in English. Similarly, though parents report selecting schools because they care about teacher characteristics, on average they end up picking schools that have lesser qualified teachers than other schools.

The qualitative interviews also offer possible explanations for the mismatch between parental perceptions and school realities. At one end, parental choices of private schools are seen to be strongly determined by aspirational criteria, such as children acquiring a smattering of English and having proper dress and behaviour. In addition, these criteria also reveal a form of ‘social distancing’ from the poorer families accessing public schools by those parents who send their children to private schools. At the other end, LFPS carry out systematic marketing and image-building efforts for enrolments in neighbouring villages. These marketing efforts highlight the very same criteria parents are seen to aspire for. As a result, visible non-educational quality parameters are reinforced by both parental aspirations for cultural capital and market-oriented practices of private schools.

The findings of the study caution against an uncritical endorsement of market-based policy moves, such as school choice and vouchers. They also challenge the simplistic notion that parental choices are well-informed and always based on the most important educational criteria for assessing schools. Moreover, the study reveals significant mismatches between parental perceptions of specific school characteristics and school realities with reference to those characteristics, for most parents sending their children to private schools.

Are parents misled or simply misinformed about private-school characteristics? Our fieldwork suggests some elements of both are at play. What is visible on one end is the aspiration for cultural capital among parents sending their children to private schools. On the other end, private schools respond to these aspirations through market-based practices. What, therefore, gets emphasised in this mutual interaction are visible but non-educational parameters, which parents seem to conflate with quality of teaching-learning in these schools. Not so visible, but critical parameters of educational quality, such as teacher capacity, get short-changed in the process.

The study provokes the need for a better understanding of the nature of this information asymmetry between educational practices and realities of schools, especially LFPS, and parental perceptions about their educational quality. There is also the need for a more nuanced understanding of parental school choice, mainly in terms of their decision-making process that arguably involves consideration and synthesis of multiple factors based on their constraints, priorities, and available information.

Further Reading

- Härmä, J (2010), '[School choice for the poor? The limits of marketisation of primary education in rural India](#)', CREATE Research Monograph, Pathways to Access series 23, University of Sussex, Brighton.
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- Srivastava, P (2007), '[Neither Voice nor Loyalty: School Choice and the Low-Fee Private Sector in India](#)', Occasional Paper No. 134, National Center for the Study of Privatisation in Education, Teachers' College, Columbia University, New York.